

Committee on Resources, Full Committee

- - Rep. James V. Hansen, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6201 - - (202) 225-2761

Witness Statement

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE
BY RUSS EHNES
ON BEHALF OF AMERICANS FOR RESPONSIBLE
RECREATIONAL ACCESS (ARRA)
May 23, 2001

Mr. Chairman:

My name is Russ Ehnes, and I am testifying today on behalf of Americans for Responsible Recreational Access (ARRA). We appreciate having this opportunity to participate in this important hearing.

ARRA was founded in June of last year because of a growing concern that fewer and fewer opportunities were available for recreational activities on public lands and waterways. ARRA is comprised of the following organizations: The American Horse Council, the Motorcycle Industry Council, the Specialty Vehicle Institute of America, the American Council of Snowmobile Associations, the National Marine Manufacturers Association, the American Motorcyclist Association, the Personal Watercraft Industry Association and the National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council. In addition, a number of state and regional user organizations have affiliated with ARRA.

Our members recognize the critical importance of protecting our environment. We also recognize that not all forms of outdoor recreation are suitable for all sites. We believe it should be the role of government and its citizens to actively discuss ways in which outdoor recreational activities can be made available to all citizens regardless of age or physical wellbeing.

Unfortunately, many of the policies pursued by the Federal Government over the past five years served to limit opportunities for recreational access. ARRA members have been concerned with the general attitude of closing off public lands to Americans. We have called this the "Crisis of Closure." We witnessed this when the National Park Service announced its intention to limit snowmobile access to many of our National Parks without regard to the fact that newer, cleaner and quieter snowmobiles are on the verge of being introduced to the marketplace.

We witnessed this again when the U.S. Forest Service promulgated a rule that would change the management of approximately 60 million acres of inventoried roadless areas in our national forests without regard to the impact such major shifts in land use management would have on local economies adjacent to the affected national forests. It goes without saying that we were pleased when Judge Lodge issued a preliminary injunction temporarily halting the roadless rule because the Forest Service failed to abide by the consultative process as defined in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). And, we witnessed this many times when President Clinton arbitrarily placed "off limits" millions of acres of Federal land to

recreational activities when he established or expanded numerous national monument areas.

We do not deny that there are problems associated with managing and using our public lands. The solution to such problems should not be, however, the simple response of denying access to these lands. Too often some interest groups push agencies to cut off access to these lands to only but a select few. Automatically restricting access is the easy way out and is too punitive to millions of law-abiding citizens who care about the environment.

When someone violates a traffic law on our highways, the response of our law enforcement agencies and society as a whole is not to close the highways to all travelers. Nor should this be the response when careless individuals improperly use a National Forest, a National Park or BLM land. Rather, violators should be prosecuted to the fullest extent permissible under the law. And if the penalties associated with such violations prove to be ineffective in stemming inappropriate behavior, then we would support strengthening these laws and the penalties. I might add that a major part of our outreach program is dedicated to working cooperatively with the agencies to develop and implement effective educational programs to provide recreation enthusiasts with the information they need to make the right choices when using Federal lands.

ARRA is sympathetic to the job that the personnel of the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service have in managing and protecting our national treasures. We know it's a tough job, made even tougher because of numerous lawsuits filed on every little decision managers make on land use policies. Unfortunately, because of these lawsuits, money that should go for work on the ground is siphoned off to pay for increased administrative burdens and legal fees. This is not fair to the people charged with the responsibility to protect these properties and it is not fair to the American people. At a time when our urban areas are becoming even more congested, more resources must be devoted to the proper maintenance of these federal properties so more Americans can use and enjoy them for recreational activities. While we are encouraged by the fact that the Bush Administration has said that it intends to devote more funds towards these needs, we must understand that the problems of neglect have existed for years. Even what has been proposed will not solve the problems identified until the money reaches the ground at the district levels.

Having said that let me be clear that ARRA does not believe that the entire responsibility should fall on the shoulders of the Federal Government. The private sector and volunteers can also play an active role in concert with Federal agencies in properly maintaining and caring for our natural resources. Let me share with this committee just one example of how local citizens are working with the Federal Government in protecting the environment.

Since 1986, I have been associated with the Great Falls Trail Bike Riders Association. Our group has worked closely with the U. S. Forest Service particularly in the Lewis and Clark National Forest. We have committed to the U. S. Forest Service that we will maintain over 400 miles of trails in this national forest. We cut bush, clear trails of fallen trees, and have worked on water diversion projects. We have literally reconstructed more than 10 miles of trails in this national forest alone. And, we have been actively involved in assisting the Forest Service in eradicating noxious weeds. In fact, we made a fifteen-year commitment to hand pull a noxious weed infestation that is more than a 1/2 mile from the closest trail. Year after year, many people devote weekends to pulling noxious weeds from this area in order to restore the area to its natural habitat. All of these efforts are done entirely with volunteer labor.

Even though we are proud of our civic contributions, it is important to note that what the Great Falls Trail

Bike Riders Association is doing is not unusual. There are hundreds of similar off-highway vehicle organizations throughout the country working to improve the environment on our national forests and public lands.

However, these organizations do far more than just trail maintenance. These groups actively support educational programs for all ages of riders on the proper use of trails for both motorized and non-motorized recreational activities. These programs teach and encourage people to use their Federal lands safely, respectfully and responsibly. These education programs are just as important as our trail maintenance programs because they contribute towards protecting the environment of our country.

Mr. Chairman, we don't pretend to have all the answers to solving the challenges confronting the usage of public lands. But from ARRA's standpoint one thing is clear, posting DO NOT ENTER signs or KEEP OUT signs does not foster civic pride or respect for our government. ARRA members are active in fostering a better appreciation of what our country has to offer its citizens in terms of recreational opportunities and the fact that as individuals, we have an obligation to do our best to protect these resources for future generations to enjoy. ARRA has confidence that our society can do just that by ensuring there is a healthy and active dialog among all interested parties who care about public lands.

As I said in my opening remarks, ARRA members recognize the critical importance of protecting our environment. We also recognize that not all forms of outdoor recreation are suitable for all sites. We also feel just as strongly that coming to the conclusion of what is and what is not appropriate recreational use should be done with all participants active in the policymaking. We stand ready to do our share.

Much has been written lately about where the new Administration stands on environmental issues. While I can't speak for the Administration, I would like to make this observation. One of our frustrations with the Clinton Administration's roadless rule was the fact that the policy seemed to be preordained and that only certain sectors of our society were really involved in the formation of the policy. I am encouraged that the Bush Administration has said that it intends to seek the opinions of local government officials and citizens prior to promulgating Federal policies that affect areas adjacent to these communities. We welcome the opportunity to have our views invited and considered. We will be less worried about the ramifications of such policies relative to recreational access when we know that this promise of participation is honored.

Finally, let me say just a few words about what we hope this committee will do during the 107th Congress. First, rigorously exercise your oversight responsibility of those Federal agencies having responsibilities for the management of our Federal properties. Even though there is a new Administration, old habits are difficult to break and we believe that this committee will need to continue to remind the Federal bureaucracy that access to Federal lands for recreational purposes is of national importance. ARRA will remain vigilant on the access issue, but we hope this committee will as well.

Second, there seems to be great conflict among various parties over the extent Federal lands should be classified as either wilderness or roadless. Clearly the Congress has jurisdiction over wilderness designation and the Administration has jurisdiction over the roadless designation. Perhaps a new classification of protection that falls somewhere between wilderness designation and multiple use designation and that permits recreational activities might be appropriate for consideration by this committee. ARRA is aware that there are several proposals suggesting such a new classification. We believe this issue merits this committee careful and thoughtful consideration.

We thank this committee for its commitment to the interests of all recreational enthusiasts and its

commitment in sharing this great land with as many of its citizens as is appropriately possible.

Mr. Chairman, I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or members of your committee would like to ask. Thank you.

#